

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

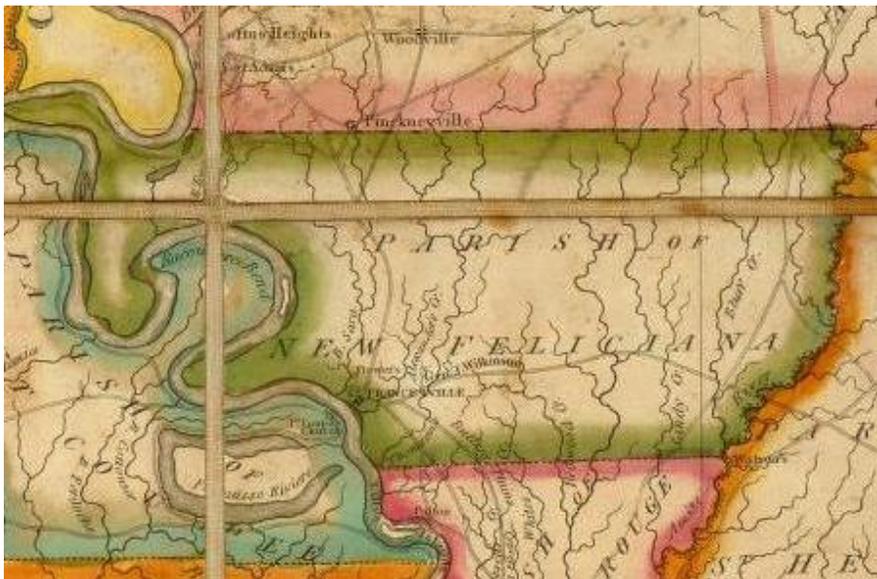
Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

St. Francisville and the Felicianas

St. Francisville, Louisiana, in West Feliciana Parish, for many years a popular place to visit by New Orleanians, is the oldest town in the Florida Parishes and has been called “the town two miles long and two yards wide.” Established in 1809, it served as the cultural and commercial center of the surrounding plantation country.

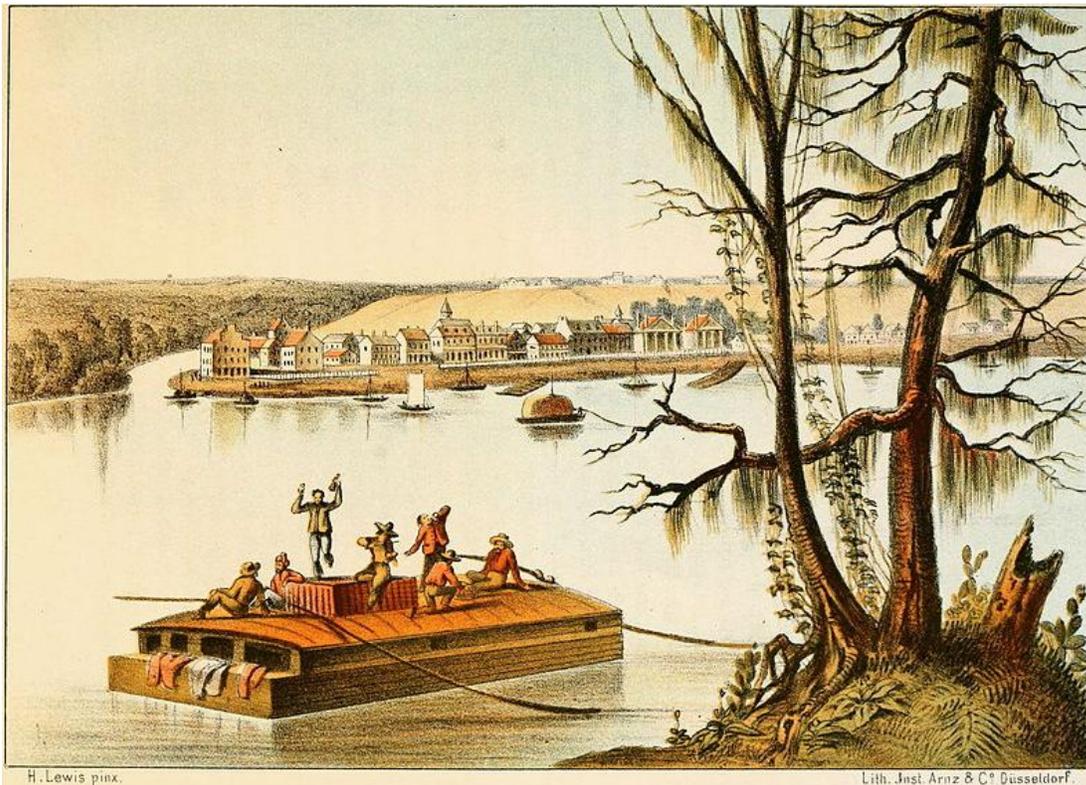
This picturesque hamlet of some 1,700 people lies on a loessal ridge, meaning created by a fine-grained accumulation of clay and silt deposited by the wind, specifically the dust storms of the Pleistocene Epoch. This soil formed vertical cliffs, or bluffs, as high as ninety feet, which attracted early Spanish Capuchins looking for sufficiently high ground for burials. They received a land grant from the King of Spain and built a wooden monastery with a cemetery sometime between 1773 and 1785 and named it for their order’s patron saint, San Francisco. By 1785, additional Spanish land grants taken up by settlers brought about the creation of the district of *Nueva Feliciana* comprising land in the Florida Parishes.



1816 map of the Parish of New Feliciana

Just below the high bluffs of St. Francisville, a different type of town sprang up in the early 1790s. Known as Bayou Sara, its name and livelihood came from the creek that provided flatboaters a safe anchorage. With the advent of the steamboat, Bayou Sara became one of the largest cotton ports on the Mississippi, but (having been destroyed by repeated fires and flooding) barely a trace of the town remains today.

The creek, or bayou, was once called "*La Rivière de la Pucelle Juine*," or "The River of the Jewish Virgin," as well as a few unsavory names. "Sara", according to historian Louise Butler, was an old woman who lived at the mouth of the stream.



German lithograph of the town presumed to be Bayou Sara, 1840s Lewis Henry (1819-1904) artist; Arnz and Company, Lithographer St. Francisville can be seen on the bluff in the background.

Fort Ste. Reine was erected and later abandoned, according to a number of old maps, where Bayou Sara empties into the Mississippi. Jean Joseph Delfau de Pontalba (grandfather of the Baron Pontalba who married the daughter of Don Andrés Almonester y Rojas) was its commandant. Old French maps indicate the spot as "Ste. Reyne," the "y" and the "i" often used interchangeably but meaning the same thing.

So how did the Florida parishes come by that name? At one time, it should be noted, they were part of West Florida, an extension of Florida itself. If one were to think of Florida as a pistol, the Florida

parishes would be at the western end of the gun's long barrel. Florida was named *Pascua Florida* in 1513 by Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon on Easter. The translation is "Flowery Easter" or "Flowering Easter" (in honor of Spain's Easter celebration known as the "Feast of the Flowers."

Feliciana, which in Spanish means "happy land," was derived from the name of Marie Félice de Saint-Maxent d'Estréhan, wife of the Spain's colonial Governor of Louisiana, Bernardo de Gálvez. Gálvez married a young widow, whose first husband was a son of Jean-Baptiste d'Estréhan, in 1777. A book entitled *The Origin of Certain Place Names in the United States*, by Henry Gannett (1905), gives a much different explanation. It indicated that Feliciana was derived from the Spanish word meaning "dome," but "dome" in Spanish, contrary to this assertion, is *la cúpula*.



*Greenwood Plantation, originally built in 1830
by William Ruffin Barrow*

The Felicianas represent two of the Florida parishes. While much of south Louisiana is rich in French culture, the Felicianas happen to be rich in English culture, pointing back to the days when the area was part of the English colony of West Florida. Unlike most of the other parishes in Louisiana, this region was not included in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, as it had been under British (and then Spanish control) for the previous forty years and again for a seventy-four day period from June to September 1810. The latter period was when Feliciana colonists, many of British descent and unhappy under the Spanish colonial regime, established the short-lived independent Republic of West Florida. St. Francisville served as the capital. The

United States quickly stepped in and annexed most of West Florida that same year. It was then soon incorporated into the Territory of Orleans, which became the U.S. state of Louisiana in 1812.

The flag of the Republic of West Florida, also known as the Bonnie Blue Flag of the Civil War period, flies on many public buildings in the Florida parishes, which are: St. Tammany, East Baton Rouge, Feliciana Parish, Livingston, St. Helena, Tangipahoa and Washington. Feliciana was divided in 1824 into East Feliciana Parish and West Feliciana Parish, with St. Francisville as the seat of West Feliciana Parish's government.

Methodist cleric Henry Skipwith (1816 – 1894) described the "county" boundaries of "Feliciana" in 1892:

"I will call attention to the proclamation of Governor Claiborne issued at St. Francisville, December 7th, 1810, defining the limits of the county of Feliciana to be 'all the territory lying west of the Perdido river and east of the Mississippi river, bounded north by the line of demarkation and south by the sea, the lakes and Bayou Manchac' and fixing the seat of justice at St. Francisville."

The area saw action during the Civil War, and one should visit the nearby battlefield at Port Hudson. The 48-day Siege of Port Hudson (May 22 – July 9, 1863), the longest in U.S. military history, was the final engagement in the Union campaign to recapture the Mississippi. While taking part in the Union blockade of the river in June 1863, Union Navy officer John E. Hart died aboard his ship. Confederate Army officer William W. Leake arranged for his adversary's burial, an event that is re-enacted in St. Francisville every June during a three-day commemoration called "The Day the War Stopped."

After the Civil War, some Jewish settlers fleeing religious persecution in Germany arrived in town. They made important contributions to local commerce during those austere years, providing credit when the banks failed and constructing significant Victorian residences such as the Gothic Victorian Wolf-Schlessinger House. Evergreenzine is the wonderful descriptive Yiddish name chosen by a German merchant for his 1885 home.



*Rosedown, built in 1835 by cotton planters
Daniel and Martha Turnbull*

St. Francisville's focus on historic preservation is evident with a number of restored historic homes and plantations, many open daily for tours, such as Rosedown Plantation State Historic Site (with its extensive gardens and beautiful oak alley); the Audubon State Historic Site (Oakley, West Indies style home to John James Audubon during his stay in West Feliciana Parish); Butler Greenwood (with its historically intact parlor now at the New Orleans Museum of Art); the Myrtles (with its ghost stories); The Cottage (the oldest); and Greenwood Plantation (known for its large Greek Revival comuns); as well as several antebellum gardens, such as Afton Villa (its Gothic mansion having been destroyed by fire in 1963). Catalpa, taking its name from a flowering plant like a number of Southern plantations, is one of the few plantations still owned and occupied by descendants of the original builder. Hillcroft (1905), a neoclassical townhouse, was built in 1905 for Judge Samuel McCutcheon Lawrason as a gift from his brother-in-law, a wealthy South Louisiana sugar planter.



West Florida in 1781

Also, within St. Francisville's historic district there are several historic churches: Grace Episcopal Church (organized March 15, 1827), the second oldest Episcopal church in Louisiana; Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Church (completed in 1893 from plans drawn by Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard); and First United Methodist. The Locust Grove Cemetery, located four and a half miles northeast of St. Francisville in West Feliciana Parish, holds the gravesites of Sarah Knox Taylor, wife of Jefferson Davis and daughter of President Zachary Taylor.

In East Feliciana Parish, the Parish Courthouse and Lawyers' Row, designated a National Historic Landmark District, is a must see. It is noted for its unique assemblage of noteworthy Greek Revival buildings. Clinton, named for New York Governor DeWitt Clinton, became the parish seat of East Feliciana Parish in 1824, when the Felicianas were split in two.

Jackson was once the site of Centenary College, founded in 1839, the centenary year of Methodism; hence its name. It was first located near Brandon, Mississippi, but was later moved to Jackson, East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, in 1845, and called "Centenary College of Louisiana."

Asphodel Plantation, also named for a flowering plant, is located in East Feliciana Parish near Jackson. It was once home to Rob Couhig, New Orleans attorney, businessman and politician, who was reared in the Felicianas. A 2010 candidate for Mayor of New Orleans, he is also

known for bringing the minor league baseball team known as the Zephyrs to the New Orleans area.

Today Rob and his wife Missy divide their time between New Orleans and St. Francisville, and have recently opened a 1,000-square-foot book and puzzle shop called "Conundrum". In addition to books, the store carries jigsaw puzzles and other puzzles of every shape and description. It is located at 11917 Ferdinand Street in the heart of St. Francisville.

In March of each year, the West Feliciana Historical Society sponsors the Audubon Pilgrimage, which commemorates the Parish's most famous visitor, artist-naturalist John James Audubon. Held each year in St. Francisville, the glorious garden spot of Louisiana's English Plantation Country, a number of significant historic structures are made open to the public.

Brought to Oakley Plantation to tutor Eliza Pirrie, the young daughter of Oakley Plantation's owners, Audubon stayed only a few short months. But in his spare time, he painted a number of his famous bird studies. Arriving at Oakley Plantation on June 18, 1821, the aspiring ornithologist wrote:

"The rich magnolias covered with fragrant blossoms, the holly, the beech, the tall yellow poplar, the hilly ground and even the red clay, all excited my admiration."



Audubon in 1826

St. Francisville has survived much through its many years and has managed to thrive as a tourist destination, noted for its beautiful architecture. The lightly traveled roads around St. Francisville and Jackson are also ideal for cycling enthusiasts. You must make a visit to the serene hills of English Louisiana, where tranquility, architecture, history and beauty all come together.

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